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The Afterlife of Homo Ludens:
From Johan Huizinga to Natalie Zemon Davis and Beyond

It was not my object to define the place of play among all other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play. (Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Foreword)

For us *Homo ludens* is a more complex person . . . and modern theoreticians have tried to sort out his games as they appear and are used in different cultures. (Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘The reasons of misrule: Youth groups and charivaris in sixteenth-century France’, *Past & Present* 50 [1971], 48–9)

This is an essay about the continuing importance, for the English-speaking world, of Johan Huizinga’s innovative approach to cultural history, especially as articulated in his often cited (but rather less often read) work, *Homo Ludens* (first published in Dutch in 1938, first English translation 1949, first generally available edition 1955).¹

Huizinga is a master story-teller, whose material is drawn from the everyday detail, literature and poetry of the late middle ages, and who weaves documented incident and event into a richly varied tapestry of the forms of ‘life, art and thought’ of ordinary people in France and Holland in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Here is how he captures the way in which, in the fifteenth century, the ‘cruel reality’ of inevitable physical suffering and violent death was compensated for by the use of elaborate rituals and exaggerated

¹ There appears to have been a Routledge and Kegan Paul hardback edition, based on the German text of *Homo Ludens*, published c. 1949. All subsequent commentators, however, refer to the Beacon Press edition, first published in 1955.
displays of public grief. These, according to Huizinga, ‘made life an art’, transforming grim experience to make it tolerable: ‘The cultural value of ritualised mourning,’ he writes, ‘is that it gives grief its form and rhythm. It transfers actual life to the sphere of the drama. Mourning at the court of France or of Burgundy dramatised the effects of grief.’

The idea which today we can understand to be central to Huizinga’s _Homo Ludens_ is a richly suggestive methodological one. If we regard systematic (public and private) forms of human behaviour as potentially rule-governed ‘games’, then the strategies used within communities by ‘players’ to modify, ironise or subvert the rules of the game can be scrutinised by the cultural historian for their capacity to illuminate the way social structures inform and shape the behaviour of individuals.²

Real civilization [writes Huizinga] cannot exist in the absence of a play-element, for civilization presupposes limitation and mastery of the self, the ability not to confuse its own tendencies with the ultimate and highest goal, but to understand that it is enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted. Civilization will, in a sense, always be played according to certain rules.³

And he adds a final point, to which we will return: ‘True civilization will always demand fair play. Fair play is nothing less than good faith expressed in play terms. Hence the cheat or the spoil-sport shatters civilization itself.’

My proposition, that Huizinga continues to exert significant current influence, may come as a surprise to you. Among those writing about Huizinga, particularly in the Netherlands, starting shortly after his death in 1945, there seems to have been a measure of agreement that in spite of his unique brilliance and originality, he ultimately failed to generate a significant ‘movement’, or to enter the historiographical mainstream.⁴

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² Since I drafted this essay, I have become aware of the fact that John von Neumann and Oskar Morganstern’s _Theory of Games and Economic Behavior_, published in 1944 by Princeton University Press, incorporated work developed in an article published by von Neumann in 1928, ‘Zur Theorie der Gesellschaftsspiele’. In other words, mathematical game theory was developing over precisely the same period as Huizinga’s history-based version of the same idea – that all human behaviour could usefully be treated as varieties of ‘game’, in which individual players had a significant measure of autonomy and reciprocity in decision-making towards a solution or outcome.


To be sure, since the 1980s, scholars such as Frank Ankersmit, Wessel Krul, Anton van der Lem and Willem Otterspeer have done much to bring Huizinga once again to the forefront of historiographical debate in the Netherlands, and Huizinga lends his name to a number of academic institutions and buildings. But I intend to show here that in the interval between the immediately-post-Second-World-War generation (critics like Pieter Geyl) and theirs, English-language development of Huizinga's seminal ideas had been going on apace, and had already contributed strongly to fundamentally new fields of cultural studies.

I shall suggest that if we trace the footprints of Huizinga's work with care through works plainly influenced by him, we will find that his brilliant formulation of the methodological function of play as a distinctive strategy for understanding and analysing the past (as proposed in Homo Ludens) has indelibly marked the thinking of innovative cultural historians in Britain and North America down to the present day. I shall maintain, indeed, that landmark works by ground-breaking cultural historians – specifically Natalie Zemon Davis's *Return of Martin Guerre* and Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, two pivotal works for the emergence of today's thriving schools of cultural history and literary historicism – stand in direct line of descent methodologically from historically revelatory moves made by Johan Huizinga in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, and above all, in *Homo Ludens*.

My starting point is 1972 – the centenary of Huizinga's birth – when a fresh wave of interest in *Homo Ludens* coincided in a particularly productive way with emerging new fields in cultural history, social anthropology and literary text studies. Reading *Homo Ludens* gave the proponents and practitioners in these fields an essential plank for the epistemological platform shared across their new academic movements, and Huizinga's approach has provided a crucial (if often unacknowledged) justification for their work ever since.

I single out one person in particular who seems to have helped facilitate the largely unremarked dissemination of Huizinga's work (particularly that on 'play') across English-language Renaissance cultural studies – someone whose ability to bridge the gap between Huizinga's immediately post-war world in the Netherlands and the academy in post-war North America actively enabled the absorption of his work into the tissue of emerging cultural studies there. This figure is Rosalie L. Colie, best known in the English-speaking world for her fascinating study of the playful use of language in Renaissance thought, *Paradoxia*.
Colie was comfortable with the Dutch language, and it was in no small part through her efforts that Huizinga’s work was brought directly to the attention of key figures in the English-speaking intellectual world. By her mediation of Huizinga to non-Dutch speakers, some considerable time before most of his work became available in English (or even in the German in which Ernst Gombrich read him), Colie eased his introduction, and focused critical attention on aspects of his work which those concentrating too closely on ideological struggles inside the Dutch academy had perhaps overlooked.

There are several textual clues in the writings of Colie’s contemporaries to support my suggestion that she ought to be considered a key figure in the transmission of Huizinga’s ideas. Ernst Gombrich’s perceptive article ‘Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens’, delivered to the Johan Huizinga conference in Groningen in December 1972 (and published a year later) is dedicated: ‘To the memory of Rosalie L. Colie (1925–1972)’, while the first footnote to Natalie Zemon Davis’s seminal 1971 article on the serious significance of the carnivalesque, ‘The reasons of misrule: Youth groups and charivaris in sixteenth-century France’, contains a similarly direct acknowledgement to her colleague at the University of Toronto, Rosalie Colie: ‘I am grateful to colleagues in several fields for suggestions and bibliographical advice, but I want here especially to acknowledge the assistance of Rosalie L. Colie.’

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7 Throughout her first direct intervention concerning Huizinga (Johan Huizinga and the task of cultural history’ (see n. 10 below), Colie cites Huizinga’s individual publications from the Versamelde Werken (ed. L. Brummel et al., 9 vs, Haarlem, 1948–53) in the original Dutch.
8 Rosalie L. Colie, internationally celebrated for her work in the cultural history of early modern Europe, drowned on July 7, 1972, when her canoe overturned in the Lieutenant River near her home in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Her years were cut unseasonably short, but in them were compressed many lifetimes of creativity, courage, and generosity’ (Natalie Zemon Davis obituary, The American Historical Review 78 [1973], 757).
Colie’s contribution depended on her taking intensely seriously, and interpreting afresh, the key ideas of *Homo Ludens*, in ways that went beyond anything that would have been possible at the time of Huizinga’s death, particularly in her important work on metaphysical poetry’s ‘play’ on words, *Paradoxa Epidemica* (1966).

It is Huizinga’s ideas, I suggest, as mediated by Colie, that set the direction of travel for the cultural historical and literary movement associated with the phrase ‘self-fashioning’ – a coinage of Stephen Greenblatt’s in 1980, which was embraced by historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis in the early 1980s.

But first a word of clarification is needed, because Colie sometimes gets bundled in with early readers who had reservations about Huizinga’s achievements. In 1964, as part of her ‘promotion’ of Huizinga to the English-speaking academic community, Colie published her own contribution to the on-going, largely Dutch post-war debate concerning Huizinga’s version of ‘cultural history’ in *The American Historical Review*, under the title ‘Johan Huizinga and the task of cultural history’ – a play on his own article, ‘The task of cultural history’ (‘De taak van cultuur-geschiedenis’). Although her intention was clearly to bring Huizinga to the attention of a North American audience, her need to ‘deal with’ hostile assessments of his work by his contemporaries does get in the way of her primary purpose.

What she tried to do was to justify Huizinga’s outlook by setting the man himself in his own cultural historical context – making Huizinga himself, as she puts it, the subject of a cultural historical analysis and contextualisation. Unfortunately, the practical effect was to bring the Dutch-language criticisms of Pieter Geyl, Jan Romein and Menno ter Braak to an English-language audience not well acquainted themselves yet with Huizinga’s work. Thereafter, those who wished to emphasise above all the limitations of Huizinga’s work were able to cite Colie alongside these others for their dissatisfaction with Huizinga’s approach, although the substance of much of their criticism had little to do with its possible applications, and a great deal to do with what were seen as his personal shortcomings faced with the ideological context of the Second World War and Dutch Occupation, in terms

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of which Huizinga appeared resolutely pessimistic about the state of contemporary civilisation, disinclined to engage with current political reality, and nostalgically yearning for better times in the past.

As a result, the succinct and sharply focused account of the strength of *Homo Ludens* that stands at the heart of Colie’s article tends to get overlooked. Colie had written:

*Homo Ludens* . . . was just what it said it was, a study of the play element in culture. ‘Culture’ was Oriental, ancient, medieval, and modern history; the ‘play element’, the games of philosophy, war, law, literature, the arts, as well as play in childhood and in adult life. Out of the phenomena Huizinga constructed a theory, not of games, but of something much more fundamental: a theory of the functions of play, always seen against the ostensibly more serious ‘normal’ modes of life. . . . *Homo Ludens* is the history neither of playing nor the idea of play. It is a morphological study of play, an interpretation of human behavior based upon comparative examples.11

The plea at the end of her article for continued attention to Huizinga’s work (‘this monument lying athwart the path of [Dutch historians’] profession’ as she describes it earlier) is similarly affirmative:

Huizinga indeed left no school, but he left the testament of his talents. It is up to cultural historians to dispose of his legacy. We may choose to bury our one talent in the ground (which heaven knows, is the easiest thing to do with it), but if we do that, we will find our talent taken from us at the judgment and given to [some] other servant of history who has dared trade with his five talents and come to the judgment with ten [Matthew 25:14–30].12

I understand this to mean that Colie believes that it will be thoroughly worthwhile for her generation to invest scholarly effort in developing Huizinga’s original idea of play to their own intellectual ends, thereby turning his original investment into a handsome reward for those who come after him.13

12 Colie, ‘Huizinga and the task of cultural history’, p. 630.
13 Ernst Gombrich too, in his 1972 conference paper on Huizinga dedicated to Colie’s memory, attempts a contextualised view of the significance of *Homo Ludens*. Once again, Gombrich acknowledged the influence of that work on his own (he cites his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* as directly indebted), but he too ends up lamenting Huizinga’s failure properly to
In Colie's own important book, *Paradoxia Epidemica*, she makes Huizinga's influence on her approach plainly apparent. Since her theme is the way in which playful use of language and imagery in the Renaissance – from John Donne to Robert Burton – can be explored to uncover a serious problematising of the reality beneath its surface, the indebtedness can be said to underpin her entire enterprise.

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As I noted, one of those who responded to Colie's enthusiasm for theories of carnival and play was the cultural historian of early modern France, Natalie Zemon Davis. Here is how, in a recent interview, she describes Colie's influence on her own early work:

When I was still a graduate student and in my early years, I much appreciated the work and friendship of Rosalie Colie (she taught in the English department at the University of Toronto for a time in the late 1960s, but I got to know her in the 1950s). I was much impressed by her interdisciplinary cultural history of the 16th and 17th century and by the way she placed ideas in a broad nexus of communication among scholars and across national boundaries. I loved her book on paradoxes, *Paradoxia Epidemica*.14

In a recent personal communication she adds:

When I think back on that conversation with Rosalie, who liked the ‘Reasons of Misrule paper’, I see how important she was as a link between Huizinga and me, especially because of her interest in paradox. She was less playful, but she certainly encouraged me to follow the line I was on.15

In the 1971 essay, ‘Reasons of misrule: youth groups and charivaris in sixteenth-century France’ to which she here refers, Natalie Davis picked up and developed the idea of the play-element intrinsic to group

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Natalie Davis tells me that until recently she still owned her original copy of *Homo Ludens*, heavily underlined and annotated throughout: ‘I still have my much marked up paper-back of *Homo Ludens* from many years ago, which showed me whole new ways to think about the past and to which I feel indebted even when I found my own paths for play’ (personal communication, 18 October 2010).

15 Natalie Zemon Davis, personal communication, 21 October 2010.
behaviour in all societies. She argued for the need to take early modern carnivals of ‘misrule’ – classic examples of ‘play’ in Huizinga’s terms – seriously, as fundamental to our historical understanding of social organisation:

As for theories of play, I have stressed the rule and rationale in popular festivals and the extent to which they remain in close touch with the realities of community and marriage. These are natural consequences of the carnival licence to deride and the historical nature of festive organizations. It is an exaggeration to view the carnival and misrule as merely a ‘safety valve’, as merely a primitive, pre-political form of recreation. Bakhtin is closer to the truth in seeing it as present in all cultures. I would say that not only is it present, but that the structure of the carnival form can evolve so that it can act both to reinforce order and suggest alternatives to the existing order. [my emphasis]16

Her subtle repositioning of the historian’s attention moves Huizinga’s argument beyond where it had taken Colie. For Colie, the attraction of Huizinga’s ‘serio ludere’ was that it allowed her to take seriously, as key to her linguistic and literary exploration, the plays on words and ideas which typify seventeenth-century poetry and prose in English (the so-called ‘metaphysicals’).

Natalie Davis took Huizinga’s ‘serio ludere’ back into social history, and develops its key ideas in much more complex fashion. Instead of a relatively straightforward juxtaposition of paradox or irony with something like ‘documented experience’, she argues that the act of playing, against the grain of the social order, both serves to acknowledge that regulated order, and offers the potential to modify it:

What then can we conclude about the character of misrule in the French countryside in the . . . sixteenth century? The use of the imagery of ‘Kingdoms’ and especially of ‘Abbeys’ not only provided a carnival reversal of status in regard to a far-away king or a nearby monastery, to whom peasants might owe services and dues; but more important provided a rule which the youth had over others and perhaps too a brotherhood existing among themselves; and it gave enormous scope to mockery and derision. But licence was not rebellious. It was very much in the service of the

village community, clarifying the responsibilities that the youth would have when they were married men and fathers, helping to maintain proper order within marriage, and to sustain the biological continuity of the village. [my emphasis]17

By the 1970s, against a background of innovative theoretical work in social anthropology and narrative theory, ‘play’ has become a locus for exploring a dynamic set of exchanges between historicised self-perception and social forms. I am proposing that Natalie Davis’s work is in the vanguard of this movement in social history, and that her incorporation of Huizinga alongside Bakhtin and Geertz gives that work a characteristic ‘turn’, whose influence can be detected in related studies in both history and literature.

Natalie Davis’s most achieved, extended use of a methodological approach which resonates with that of Huizinga is also her most famous piece of writing: her 1983 book, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

*The Return of Martin Guerre* is the story of an imposter, Arnaud du Tilh, who takes the place of Martin Guerre, a man who has absconded from his family and responsibilities, in the French village of Artigat in the sixteenth century. Du Tilh lives undetected for years with Martin’s wife, and lays claim to family properties. Eventually unmasked by family members, the false Martin Guerre is tried and condemned to death. The coup de grace at his trial is the sensational reappearance of the real Martin Guerre to claim his wife and inheritance.

Natalie Davis’s carefully historically documented retelling of this tale focuses on the subtle trickery required in order for the substitution of the fraudulent Martin for the real one to work – careful and long-term counterfeiting in everything from family memories to daily behaviour on the part of both Arnaud du Tilh and his ‘wife’ Bertrande de Rols. Using a wealth of contemporary documentation and archive, she builds up a rich picture of village life in Artigat, against which she sets what detail we have of their lives:

As I embedded ‘imposture’ in the cultural practice of sixteenth-century life, so I sought to embed what I called ‘the invented marriage’ – the relationship that began as a false identity but was sustained by collaboration – in some kind of cultural understanding available to sixteenth century peasants.18

17 Davis, ‘Reasons of misrule’, p. 54.
Her methodology (further explicated in an essay published in 1988, in response to a hostile challenge to her treatment of the Martin Guerre story) is that of embedding this story in the values and habits of sixteenth-century French village life and law, to use them to help understand central elements in the story and to use the story to comment back on them . . . literary and narrative structure are part of the ‘data’ upon which I want to do ‘vulgar reasoning’ to get at a sixteenth-century argument.19

At the close of the story-telling section of The Return of Martin Guerre, Natalie Davis asks herself a question. How self-consciously did the imposter mould his day-to-day behaviour to that of the man he had supplanted? In court, under cross-examination, according to one of her sources, ‘he answered so well . . . he almost seemed to be playing’:

Lawyers, royal officers, and would-be courtiers [comments Natalie Davis] knew all about self-fashioning – to use Stephen Greenblatt’s term – about the molding of speech, manners, gesture, and conversation that had helped them to advance, as did any newcomer to high position in the sixteenth century. Where does self-fashioning stop and lying begin?20

In her 1988 article, ‘On the Lame’, Davis elaborates further on why she chooses ‘self-fashioning’ (a term, she points out, first used by Michel de Montaigne in his essay ‘Du dementir’)21 to animate her historical methodology. In doing so, she brings Huizinga’s ‘play’ and the derived notion of ‘self-fashioning’ sharply together:

I wanted to extend the concept of forming and fashioning the self to a wider range of situations and social groups – to make it a sixteenth century issue, not just a ‘Renaissance’ issue. . . . I explore the customs of nicknaming and carnival masking in these regions and the cross into the transgression of taking on a false name in forgery cases, in stories, and finally in the case of Arnaud du Tilh.


20 ‘On s’y forme, on s’y façonne . . . car la dissimulation est des plus notables qualitez de ce siècle’ (cit. Davis, ‘On the Lame’, p. 589).
'Imposture' stands not as an isolated form of behavior . . . but as an extreme and disturbing case on a sixteenth-century spectrum of personal change for purposes of play, of advantage, or of 'attracting the benevolence of others'.

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At the end of 'Reasons of misrule', Natalie Davis comments that the approach she has taken to the forms of play identifiable in peasant communities in early modern France might well be extended beyond 'role-play' to more literal kinds of 'play' – fiction and drama from the period – an invitation to new historicists to join hands, methodologically speaking, with the cultural historians: 'Finally, to literary specialists I may have offered a new source. . . . Is Hamlet perhaps a charivari of the young against a grotesque and unseemly remarriage, a charivari where the effigy of the dead spouse returns, the vicious action is replayed?'

I suggested earlier that the core idea that underlies the widely pervasive notion of 'self-fashioning' in social history and literary history today might itself derive from Huizinga. The term 'self-fashioning', in this context, was coined and explicated around 1980 by Stephen Greenblatt, the distinguished literary critic and founder of the critical movement now generally referred to as 'New Historicism'. The term designates a set of critical practices that Greenblatt himself refers to as 'cultural poetics'. Since 1980, I can state with some confidence, New Historicism and cultural poetics have completely transformed the field of cultural textual studies in English-language literary and textual studies.

Here is Greenblatt, in the opening chapter of his groundbreaking 1980 book, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, linking the strategies used by Hans Holbein in his iconic double portrait 'The Ambassadors' with Thomas More's in Utopia:

If there exist highly significant 'blind spots' in Utopia . . . they exist like the great, central blind spot [the anamorphic skull] in Holbein's 'Ambassadors': as the object of the artist's profound, playful attention. This playfulness – so easily acknowledged and ignored – deserves special emphasis, for it occupies a central role in both the painting and the book. . . . The distorted skull

22 Davis, 'On the Lame', p. 590.
23 Davis, 'Reasons of misrule', p. 75.
in Holbein’s painting, for all the grimness of its imagery, is itself an invitation to the viewer to play, while the reader of Utopia is invited to enter a carefully demarcated playground that possesses nonetheless a riddling relation to the world outside.24

A footnote to this observation makes the connection to Huizinga explicit: ‘Utopia,’ writes Greenblatt, ‘satisfies virtually all of the conditions of play described by Johan Huizinga, [in] Homo Ludens.’

Accordingly, Greenblatt teases out of More’s oeuvre a set of strategies he believes More used, to hold at arm’s length the constraints and impediments for a man of intellectual integrity, attempting to steer his way through the political thicket of Henry VIII’s government and its policies. The idea of linking More’s Utopia and political ‘play’ was not itself original to Greenblatt – others with an eye on Huizinga had described his playful irony as ‘serio ludere’, adopting a coinage found in fifteenth-century humanist discussion of artful and contrived discourse. But it was Greenblatt who developed Huizinga’s insight into an innovative reading practice: if we read Utopia as More’s way of fashioning himself into a serious commentator on his own political predicament, who employs ‘play’ to prevent himself becoming entirely enmeshed in the political world he inhabits, then perhaps we have a blueprint for reading other, less directly political, Renaissance authors’ way of engaging with the world in which they live.25

In the case of Thomas More, Greenblatt suggests, the self-ironising self-fashioning of his early career gave way to a grim objectivity at the end of his life, which sent him ultimately to the block (a shadow perhaps of Huizinga’s dismay at the fixed, absolute forms of totalitarianism under which he lived in the 1940s). In the context of Utopia, however, Greenblatt’s formulation can be heard to derive elegantly from Homo Ludens:

[More’s] life seems nothing less than this: the invention of a disturbingly unfamiliar form of consciousness, tense, ironic, witty,

25 ‘There is, of course, also a close (and acknowledged) connection between Greenblatt’s ‘self-fashioning’ and social anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s methodology for exploring social forms. As, indeed, Natalie Davis pays tribute to the importance of recent work in anthropology by Geertz and Turner. See, for example: ‘Social conflict is not something that happens when, out of weakness, indefiniteness, obsolescence, or neglect, cultural forms cease to operate, but rather something which happens when, like burlesqued winks, such forms are pressed by unusual situations or unusual intentions to operate in unusual ways’ (Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures [New York: Basic Books, 1973], p. 28).
poised between engagement and detachment, and above all, fully aware of its own status as an invention. . . . [And] one consequence of life lived as histrionic improvisation is that the category of the real merges with that of the fictive; the historical More is a narrative fiction. To make a part of one’s own, to live one’s life as a character thrust into a play, constantly renewing oneself extemporaneously and forever aware of one’s own unreality – such was More’s condition, such, one might say, his project.26

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I have tried to show how Huizinga’s Homo Ludens provided the inspiration for a loosely associated group of English-language social and literary historians all of whom were looking for a methodology which kept individual and community flexibly in play (and at play) during the creative process. Let me conclude by returning to the general question of Johan Huizinga’s importance and enduring reputation as a historian.

In his first and most well-known book, The Waning of the Middle Ages,27 Huizinga argues – in a direct response to Jacob Burckhardt – that the richly realistic, over-decorated art and literature of the late medieval period were not the result of a flowering or flourishing, nor were they an affirmation of cultural confidence. Rather, they were the distraught activities of a community which lived in fear, in a state of constant anticipation of violence, spiritually cowed and politically coerced. In that world, individual experience was so bleak and fraught that the artistically gifted could only concentrate on drowning out the din of dark and dangerous day-to-day life. The pleasure their art gives us is that of a society on the brink of collapse and a culture on the wane: ‘Between the absolute denial of all worldly joys and a frantic yearning for wealth and pleasure, between dark hatred and merry conviviality, they lived in extremes.’28

Huizinga insists that it is only by paying attention to the intense feelings which saturate his period that it can be properly understood, and lessons drawn from it to inform society’s present and future conduct. His strategy is to interrogate the past from a fully emotionally engaged position – as Stephen Greenblatt would put it, ‘[He] begin[s] with a desire to speak with the dead’. As Huizinga puts it elsewhere:

26 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, p. 31.
27 The Waning of the Middle Ages (1919; English translation, London: E. Arnold, 1924). The most recent translated edition retitles this as The Autumn of the Middle Ages.
There is in our historical consciousness an element of great importance that is best defined by the term historical sensation. One might also call it historical contact. Historical imagination would be too comprehensive and historical vision too definite. . . . This contact with the past, a contact which it is impossible to determine or analyse completely, is like going into another sphere; it is one of the many ways given to man to reach beyond himself, to experience truth. The object of this feeling is not people as individuals nor human life or human thoughts. It is hardly an image which our mind forms or experiences. If it takes on a form at all this remains composite and vague: an Ahnung [hunch] of streets, houses, fields as well as sounds and colours or people moving or being moved. There is in this manner of contact with the past the absolute conviction of reality and truth.  

It was this passionate concern with the practice of history as the means to ‘absolute conviction of reality and truth’ that marked out Huizinga’s approach to history (he was not, after all, by training a historian) as so distinctive, and brought him to prominence. It also made some of his Dutch colleagues uncomfortable. One of his first biographers, Kurt Köster, called Waning – ‘the book that was to make Huizinga’s name world-famous’ Köster says – ‘an unusual book’, whose importance was not understood for some time after its publication. As another commentator from the late 1940s put it, readers were surprised that ‘the rambling colourful tales of the chroniclers had not been consigned to the historical lumber-room, but had been listened to, understood and illuminated by historical perception’ – by ‘an unusual historical sensorium [sensibility]’.  

There was a context for Huizinga’s increasing commitment to history as a passionate and emotional pursuit. In 1940 the University of Leiden, where he had been a professor of history for twenty-five years, closed its doors in protest against the dismissal of its Jewish professors by the occupying German forces. In the spring of 1942 Huizinga was arrested and imprisoned, along with other prominent Dutch intellectuals, in the internment camp of Sint Michielgestel at Brabant. Shortly afterwards he was removed from the camp to hospital because

of ill-health. For the remainder of the war he lived in exile and under surveillance, with his second wife and small daughter, in the village of De Steeg, near Arnhem on the Rhine. Deprived of his books, and in failing health, Huizinga spent his last years trying to come to terms with the world of which he was now a part. He died just months before Dutch liberation, in February 1945.

In 1943, Huizinga published a short essay entitled ‘History changing form’, which built upon a briefer piece, ‘On a definition of history’, written almost fifteen years earlier. ‘History changing form’ reflects his increasing pessimism about what he sees as the impending dismantling and destruction of European values and culture. Bluntly put, his argument is that you can tell a great deal about an age by looking at the way in which it writes its history – the form and imaginative style in which it is produced. Looking at history-writing in the 1940s, he does not like what he sees.

The main purpose of history, Huizinga wrote then, is to shed light on and make sense of the present. ‘History,’ he says in the earlier version, ‘is the intellectual form in which a civilisation renders account to itself of its past.’

In any period, a community decides what it regards as the values central to it, identifies those features in its past, and imaginatively crafts them into a story which gives sense and meaning to the here and now. In a humane society, says Huizinga, the story of its past can be told with verve and imagination as one which connects us directly with ordinary men and women of earlier times.

In 1943, Huizinga felt that the discipline of history was changing for the worse. It was increasingly concerned with economics, quantitative assessments, mass movements and trends based on numerical analysis. History had got less colourful, less easy to follow, less accessible to the general reader, Huizinga argued, all of which indicated that his own society too had lost its moral bearings:

Now even in Europe men of science, technologists and statisticians, have driven almost all thought [about humanity] into the corner of purely quantitative valuation. Only the number counts, only the number expresses thought. This shift in the mode of thinking is full of grave dangers for civilisation, and for that civilising product of the mind called history. Once numbers reign

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supreme in our society, there will be no stories left to tell, no images for history to evoke.\textsuperscript{32}

Earlier I quoted Huizinga’s comment on ‘fair play’ as defining a civilised community’s game-playing: ‘True civilization will always demand fair play. Fair play is nothing less than good faith expressed in play terms. Hence the cheat or the spoil-sport shatters civilization itself.’

When Huizinga wrote this, National Socialism was on the rise, and the shadow of ‘spoil-sports’ cast across Europe was a long one. According to Huizinga, absolutist regimes produce fixed, inflexible rules to which communities are forced to adhere, at the same time as they ‘spoil’ (by suppressing improvisation, individualism and play) the richly generative, life-affirming games of others.

My point here is not that we should dwell on the particular conditions of Huizinga’s development of his idea of play as fundamental to understanding the human condition. It is rather in order to point out that there is a strong affinity between Huizinga’s fervent plea for a humane narrative history, and the passion with which today historians and critics such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Stephen Greenblatt affirm the possibility of framing a better today by attending scrupulously to the textual and documentary residue of the past. Hence the urgency with which they state their purpose as critics and historians – more than a profession, more of an ethical quest. Here is Stephen Greenblatt:

\begin{quote}
I wanted to find in the past real bodies and living voices, and if I knew that I could not find these . . . I could at least seize upon those traces that seemed to be close to actual experience. . . . I wanted to recover in my literary criticism a confident conviction of reality, without giving up the power of literature to sidestep or evade the quotidian and without giving up a minimally sophisticated understanding that any text depends upon the absence of the bodies and voices that it represents. I wanted the touch of the real in the way that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of the transcendent.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

And here, finally, is Natalie Davis, narrating her investment in past voices as guiding lights for strong moral values in our present and future:

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
My whole book . . . is an exploration of the problem of truth and doubt: of the difficulty in determining true identity in the sixteenth century and of the difficulty in the historian’s quest for truth in the twentieth. ‘In historical writing, where does reconstruction stop and invention begin?’ is precisely the question I hoped readers would ask and reflect on, the analogy with the uncertain boundary between self-fashioning and lying built into my narrative. . . . I see complexities and ambivalences everywhere; I am willing to settle, until I can get something better, for conjectural knowledge and possible truth; I make ethical judgments as an assay of pros and cons, of daily living and heroic idealism.34

The powerful methodological exploration of ‘play’, sustained and elaborated by new historicists and cultural historians, based on Huizinga’s groundbreaking work, continues to stand guard over civilised values, down to the present day.

CODA

On 10 December 2010, a matter of hours before I was due to deliver the Huizinga Lecture at the University of Leiden, I received an email from Stephen Greenblatt, to whom I had sent a copy of my lecture electronically, as I left the United Kingdom. So pertinent was his response to the occasion that I read it out in full at the end of the lecture. It is fitting, I think, to include it again here:

Dear Lisa,

Just a quick follow-up note, now that I have read your essay. You are, not surprisingly, a canny detective. This because you intuited what you could not have known: in 1966–67, when I returned to graduate school at Yale, there was for some reason a shortage of Renaissance teachers. Probably it was just a matter of sabbaticals. Alvin Kernan, who became my doktor vater, taught a Shakespeare course. But in the spring semester Yale had to hire a visiting professor to teach a course, which I took, and that professor was Rosalie Colie. The course, on 17th century poetry, was deeply confusing to me: it was – she was – disorganized, scattered, startlingly erudite, prone to obscure Latin puns, obsessed by a Dutch culture of whose existence I had scarcely been aware, full

34 Davis, ‘On the Lame’, pp. 573, 574.
of winding stairs that seemed to lead to locked doors, brilliant and maddening. At the end of the semester I felt that I had learned nothing and everything; oddly close to her and at the same time completely mystified by her. I still have a few of my books from that course, filled with my notes charged with both fascination and bafflement. In short, the experience of very serious play indeed.

Stephen